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Palos Hills spy? Wife and friends petition Belgrade

By Karen Lussor

Zlata Simic didn't worry at first when her husband Bosco was not among the travelers arriving at O'Hare Airport on April 21.

The 51-year-old La Grange resident had returned to his native Yugoslavia on April 4 to see his dying father and attend his mother's funeral. When her husband didn't leave the airplane with the rest of the passengers, Zlata assumed her father-in-law had died at the last minute and her husband had been unable to notify her of the delay.

But when she still had not heard from her husband by the following evening, Zlata phoned her brother-in-law in Belgrade and discovered that Bosco had been arrested by government authorities the day before he was to return home.

Today, Bosco Simic remains behind bars, accused of being a spy. For Zlata and her family, the vigil continues despite four months of constant contact with U.S. State Department officials and legislators.

"Everybody is so nice with me," Zlata says. "But while I complain, we have no results. We are in the same spot we were in 3½ months ago."

Bosco Simic, who worked as an associate dean for non-traditional learning at Moraine Valley Community College in Palos Hills, left Yugoslavia illegally with his family in 1966 to live in the United States. His wife's mother and sister lived in Oak Park at the time.

"We wanted to make a better life," Zlata says.

From 1964 to 1966, Bosco worked as chief of protocol for a Yugoslav bank. Before 1964, Bosco was employed as a translator by the government. Although his April trip was the first time Bosco returned to the communist country, obtaining a visa from officials at the Yugoslav Consulate General in Chicago was not difficult, Zlata says.

"He didn't have any problems," she says. "He got the visa in less than five minutes."

Upon the advice of friends and co-workers, Zlata began attempts at gaining her husband's release by calling and writing several officials, including U.S. Rep. Edward Derwinski (R-Flossmoor), U.S. Sen. Alan Dixon (D-Beileville), U.S. Sen. Charles Percy (R-Wilmette), Assistant U.S. Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig and even President Ronald Reagan.

Zlata also contacted officials from the Yugoslav Consulate in Chicago. "They were very pleasant with me, but they didn't know anything," Zlata says. Telephone messages left for the ambassador at the Yugoslav Embassy in Washington were not answered, she adds.

Communication with U.S. government officials has not been a problem, Zlata says. She receives calls and letters from them frequently. Congressional aides have been assigned to monitor the case. U.S. Embassy officials in Yugoslavia have met with Bosco and his two attorneys and report that he is in good health. Everything that can be done is being done, they report.

But not everyone is satisfied.

"I'm concerned that Bosco Simic's case is a small fish in a large global sea of politics," says Lee Harris, a Moraine Valley trustee.

obtain information. "They certainly have communicated, but we fail to see any positive results of whatever they're doing."

Actual progress is slow, Zlata says. For instance, after U.S. Sen. Percy had a July 6 meeting with Yugoslav Ambassador Budimir Loncar, Zlata received a letter from Percy. The letter stated that Loncar had expressed optimism that "the situation will be resolved soon," and that the family "shouldn't worry about the result."

In addition, Zlata did not discover that the charge filed against her husband was espionage until July 28, when Richard Miles, former Yugoslav country officer for the U.S. State Department, called her. Miles reported then that U.S. State Department officials would be receiving a copy of the indictment any day and that the Yugoslav government had scheduled her husband's trial for the end of September, Zlata says.

But four weeks later, U.S. State Department officials had not received the document, says George Humphrey, new Yugoslav country officer. "We continue to be in touch with Mr. Simic there, and also with his lawyers and the Yugoslav authorities," Humphrey says. "Hopefully, we'll know more about the exact charges."

Until they receive a copy of the indictment, officials won't decide how to handle the Simic case. "It all depends on what sort of charges have been filed and whether they feel he's broken the laws," Humphrey says.

Zlata's family, friends and co-workers only can speculate as to why Bosco Simic has been indicted on spy charges.

Often, such cases are created by Yugoslav government officials to mask economic problems, says Nicholas Moravcevic, head of the department of Slavic languages and literature at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, where Bosco Simic is a doctoral candidate. Defendants frequently are tried, found guilty and then released, Moravcevic says.

"It's obviously something for internal consumption," he says. "It's a part of their own propaganda."

Only weeks before Bosco was to return from Yugoslavia, Moravcevic visited the University of Belgrade to establish a cultural-exchange program upon invitation from Yugoslav educators. When Moravcevic was asked whether he knew of any faculty members or students who might be interested in participating in the program, he suggested Bosco Simic.

"They seemed to be delighted," Moravcevic says. "They knew he was born in Yugoslavia and fluent in Serbo-Croatian."

Moravcevic since wrote to the director of the University of Belgrade, dissolving any plans for the exchange program. No reply was sent, he says.

Like Harris, Moravcevic is frustrated with the U.S. State Department's efforts at securing Simic's release. "I'm afraid that the policy of the State Department people is one of appeasement in all of these cases," Moravcevic says. "They just feel that Yugoslavs should not be provoked."

While Zlata says the State Department's assurance that her husband is not being physically mistreated is comforting, she continues to worry. Bosco suffered a heart attack three years ago, has high blood pressure and experiences severe migraine headaches, she says.

For her two children, 21-year-old Lillian and 13-year-old Leila, adjusting to their father's absence has been difficult. "It was hard for Leila — very hard," Zlata says. "She was very close to my husband."

As her husband begins his fifth month in prison, Zlata remains optimistic. "I have to be optimistic," she says. "I hope for the best. I hope he'll come home soon — by the end of September at the latest."